

Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge  
The refuge is located along High Point and Gunston Road  
in Lorton, VA 22079  
703/490 4979

#### Connecting to the Refuge Online

The Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge is one of three refuges of the Potomac River National Wildlife Refuge Complex, managed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Information on this refuge and links to our other refuges can be obtained by going to <http://www.fws.gov/masonneck/index.html>.

#### Federal Relay Service

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#### U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

1 800/344 WILD  
<http://www.fws.gov>

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**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service**

# Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck *National Wildlife Refuge*



**Bald eagle preparing for flight**

©Antonio J. "Tony" Quezon

*“Each generation has its  
own rendezvous with the  
land...we are all brief  
tenants on this planet.  
By choice or default, we  
will carve out a land  
legacy for our heirs.”*  
– Stuart Udall



## Welcome to the Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge

Eighteen miles south of Washington, D.C. on the banks of the Potomac (River), lays a peninsula known as Mason Neck. Here on February 1, 1969, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service created the first national wildlife refuge established specifically for the protection of our nation's symbol, the bald eagle. Once on the brink of extinction, the bald eagle enjoys the safety of the refuge's forests and shoreline for nesting and foraging along the upper portions of the Potomac River and its tributaries.

The refuge consists of mature hardwood forests, large freshwater marshes and over 4 miles of undeveloped Potomac River shoreline. These important habitats within the 2,227 acre Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge play a vital role to preserve the diversity of wildlife and plant-life in Northern Virginia.

The Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge is a magnet for migrating songbirds and raptors either as a place to rest or as their home for nesting and raising young. The Audubon Society has recognized the significance of this site for providing essential habitat for birds by designating the refuge as an Important Bird Area of Virginia.



## History and Land Use on the Neck

As early as 1608, Captain John Smith, explorer and founder of Jamestown, documented the location of a uniquely boot-shaped peninsula located between the Potomac and Occoquan Rivers in what is now southern Fairfax County, Virginia. Smith wrote of the abundance of game and fish on this stretch of the Potomac which was dotted with villages and camps of the Dogue Indians. He referred to the peninsula as Dogue's Neck.

By the late 1600's, Native Americans were driven out and their way of life

was displaced by the establishment of colonial farm holdings. The name of the peninsula changed from Dogue's Neck to Mason's Neck to reflect ownership by its most prominent landholder, George Mason II and his three sons.

George Mason II introduced plantation agriculture as the primary land use. Open marshes were converted to impoundments managed to support the production of wild rice. Fields were planted initially in tobacco and later in wheat and corn. The land was greatly impacted by these operations which caused extensive soil erosion and loss of soil fertility. The crop fields were abandoned and in time reverted back to forest.

In the early 1960's, in order to satisfy the demand for housing brought about by the post World War II building boom, a developer sought out land on the Neck to build a planned community and airport. Elizabeth Spears Hartwell, a local resident



who valued the pristine nature of the peninsula, organized an effort to stop this development. She recognized the potential of the Mason Neck peninsula as a safe haven for the endangered bald eagles along the Potomac River. Armed with enthusiasm and a gift for writing and public speaking, her citizen crusade convinced key Federal, state and local officials of the value of protecting the Neck and the bald eagle for future generations.

Elizabeth Hartwell's steadfast work resulted in the establishment of the Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge in 1969 earning her the nickname of "The Eagle Lady". On August 6, 2006, Congress approved a name change for the refuge to the Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge in her honor.

Today, the refuge stands as a testament to all of the individuals who worked so hard to secure the nature of the Mason Neck peninsula for future generations and to all citizens across the nation who through activism, advocacy and personal sacrifice have stepped up for the cause of conservation.



Elizabeth Hartwell

Courtesy of the Hartwell family



Bill Wallen/USFWS

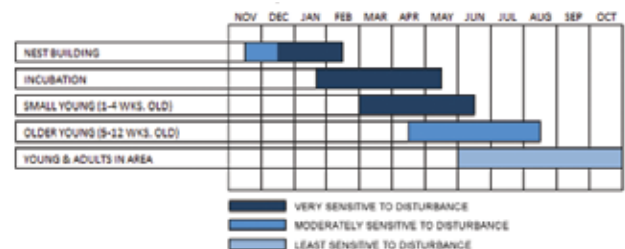
*Mature and immature bald eagles*

## Management

The primary focus of management on the Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge is to protect essential nesting, feeding and roosting habitat for bald eagles. At the time of its establishment in 1969, the number of nesting pairs of bald eagles had plummeted in the lower 48 states to less than 500, and the bald eagle was placed on the endangered species list.

In 2007, due to a significant recovery in its numbers, this majestic bird of prey was removed from the endangered species list. Though no longer considered endangered, the bald eagle will continue to be protected under federal law. The refuge and adjacent conservation sites on the Neck ensure a stable future for eagles along the Potomac.

## Sensitivity to Disturbance



©Center for Conservation Biology

Although the refuge protects only 2,277 acres of the Neck, over 6,400 acres of the Mason Neck peninsula have been set aside for conservation or recreational use. The refuge, along with Mason Neck State Park, Pohick Bay Regional Park, Gunston Hall and the Meadowood Recreation Area cooperatively work together to protect the bald eagle, address threats, provide recreational opportunities and pool resources to enhance the overall efforts to preserve the Neck for future generations.

### White-tailed Deer



The Virginia white-tailed deer is the largest wild animal found on the Neck. These beautiful creatures of the forest and field sport a brown tail, the underside of which is bright white.

Deer have always been a source of food for man and in the late 1700's George Mason IV actually maintained a tract of land adjacent to Gunston Hall as a deer park for the management of his personal deer herd. Today man is less dependent upon wild game for food. With a lesser threat from man and no natural predator, the population of deer on the Neck and throughout Northern Virginia has increased dramatically. Herbaceous plants such as orchids, understory shrubs and young trees have been over-browsed causing huge impacts to the field and forest habitats and the balanced ecology of the Neck. As the quantity and quality of food sources declines, the overall health of the deer also declines.

The Mason Neck land managers work with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries to control the deer population through management hunts. Fewer animals have served man better and fewer still have spawned as much controversy over the need and means of managing their growing numbers.



*Great blue heron*

### Heron Colony

The refuge is home to one of the largest great blue heron colonies on the Potomac River. Located at the extreme southern end of the peninsula on a bluff overlooking the Potomac River, the colony currently supports over 500 active nests. Impoundments (manmade water bodies) within High Point Creek and Little Marsh Creek ensure that these long-legged, dagger-beaked birds have a stable food source of fish and amphibians. Water control structures at these impoundments allow for the seasonal manipulation of water levels. To control the encroachment of trees, the water level is raised through winter and spring. To provide shallow pools for young herons to forage for food, the water level is lowered through the summer months.





## The Great Marsh

The Great Marsh, located on the southeastern edge of the refuge, was purchased in 1969 to form the basis of the Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge. This unique and historic marsh can be viewed from the end of the Joseph V. Gartlan Jr. Great Marsh Trail and from Eagle Point along the Woodmarsh Trail.

At 250 acres, this fresh water marsh is one of the largest on the Potomac River. Historically the marsh has been used for waterfowl hunting and the harvesting of wild rice. Wooden pilings, visible from the Great Marsh trail and an earthen dam on Raccoon Creek at the southwestern end are fading evidence of man's manipulation of the marsh.

The appearance of the marsh changes dramatically through each season of the year. In summer, dragonflies streak across a blanket of pond lilies. You can find active beaver lodges with freshly cut beaver sticks and an occasional muskrat roaming about. Fruiting wild rice, an

important food source for wintering waterfowl, can be seen in tall clusters throughout. Through the fall and spring, migrating ducks, raptors and songbirds stop at the marsh to rest on their long journey. During the winter, the marsh is brown and desolate, highlighted by the presence of snow white tundra swans that are joined by large numbers of ducks and Canada geese.

### Enjoy your refuge

Visitors to the refuge can enjoy hiking our 4 miles of trails to view birds and other wildlife, or simply to enjoy the solitude. Whatever your reason for coming, the refuge is a place to learn about nature and the history of man's use of the land on the Neck. Our desire for each visitor is that they connect with nature in a meaningful way.



Though exploring the refuge is restricted to the nature trails, you'll find that these winding forested corridors are rich in nature and history. Walk too fast and you'll tramp right past old forest roads, interesting plants and secretive animals.

*Great Marsh*





The digital photo age has made nature photography both fun and easy. Vistas and overlook platforms located along our hiking trails provide secluded viewing points to capture photographs of wildlife and colorful landscapes.



Bird watching or birding is one of the fastest growing outdoor activities in the nation. Birders enjoy the search for woodland songbirds, waterfowl and eagles as they hike through the mature upland forests of oak and hickory to the expansive tidal marsh habitat.

Bald eagles are best viewed during the winter when large numbers congregate along the Potomac. We can't guarantee that you will see an eagle during your visit, but we can assure you that our nation's symbol has a secure home on the refuge.



The Joseph V. Gartlan Jr. Great Marsh Trail is fully accessible to individuals with mobility impairments. Restrooms and facilities at the refuge parking lots and those located along the trail corridors have been constructed to meet current accessibility standards.

## Woodmarsh Trail

This 3 mile circuit trail begins at a parking lot off High Point Road. A hike along the trail provides you with an opportunity to wind your way through a mature eastern deciduous forest. A large covered platform with a telescope is located just over 1 mile from the parking lot and provides a sweeping view of the central portions of the 250 acre Great Marsh. As you walk this trail, look for evidence of man's use of the land. Listen for the sounds of woodpeckers, the movement of deer and the mewing of wood ducks. This trail is composed of compacted soil and gravel. Some segments may become muddy after rains. Comfortable walking shoes are sufficient for navigating this trail.



*Woodmarsh Platform*

Portions of the Woodmarsh Trail may be closed from December 1 through the middle of July if eagles are nesting near the trail.



Bill Wallen/USFWS

*Great Marsh Trail Platform*

## Joseph V. Gartlan Jr. Great Marsh Trail

The paved,  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile long, fully accessible trail is located on Gunston Road one mile east of High Point Road. The trail follows a forested ridge to the 250 acre Great Marsh. A platform at the end of the trail rewards the hiker with a view of the entire marsh. Benches spaced at intervals provide quiet rest stops along the 20 minute walk. This trail affords the best opportunity to see bald eagles and observe wintering waterfowl.

Courtesy of the Gartlan family



*Senator Joseph V. Gartlan Jr.*

## High Point Multi-Use Trail

The trail is named in honor of Joseph V. Gartlan Jr. who served in the Virginia State Senate for 28 years from 1972 until 2000. He earned the respect and admiration of his colleagues by being an outspoken protector of the environment and champion for the rights of Virginians with mental and physical disabilities. Senator Gartlan lived on the Neck until his death in 2008.

The High Point multi-use trail is a paved corridor leading from Gunston Road along High Point Road, through the national wildlife refuge, to the Mason Neck State Park visitor center. At 3 miles in length this trail



is popular for hikers and bikers. Access to the trail is available at the Woodmarsh Trail Parking lot, 0.6 miles off Gunston Road on High Point Road. This is the only trail through the refuge on which bikes may be ridden.

## Educational Opportunities and Group Visits

Schools, hiking clubs and birding organizations enjoy outings on the refuge for environmental education. Organized school, civic and professional groups may reserve dates for presentations, special access, and outdoor classroom activities. Any group of 10 or more must obtain a special use permit for the visit. More information on these permits can be obtained by visiting the refuge website.

## Volunteers

Volunteers help to survey wildlife, maintain trails, manage habitat, mow fields, assist with deer hunts and much more. To learn more about volunteer opportunities, visit the refuge website.



*USFWS volunteers banding a songbird*

## Protect Your Refuge

Refuge regulations serve to enable you to enjoy your visit to the refuge while ensuring the protection of our natural resources. All visitors to the refuge are expected to comply with local, state and Federal laws and regulations.



## Hours and Annual Closures

Lands within the boundary of the refuge are closed to public access with the exception of the refuge trails and the High Point Multi-Use Trail. We invite you to take advantage of the opportunities to see wildlife along these designated trail corridors. Area Closed signs designate additional areas closed to visitors to protect wildlife and plant life or to provide for safety.

The refuge trails and parking lots are open year round: April 1- September 30 from 7 AM to 7 PM and October 1 – March 31 from 7 AM to 5 PM. Please plan your visit so that you are not on the trails after dark. All trails and educational facilities within the refuge are closed for a number of days in the fall during white-tailed deer management hunts.



To ensure that plants and wildlife are protected all visitors must remain on the trails. Wandering into the forest or marshes to explore or to pursue other activities is strictly prohibited.



Pets must be kept on a leash and under your control at all times. The leash may not exceed 10 feet in length.



Bicycles are not permitted on any of the refuge trails. Bike racks are available at the trail head parking lots. Bicycles are permitted on the High Point Multi-Use Trail.



Camping and outdoor fires are not permitted on the refuge.



Do not collect or remove any natural or cultural objects including mushrooms, nuts, flowers, wood, rocks, feathers, bones, arrowheads or bottles.



Do not feed, disturb, or capture any wildlife on the refuge. Do not release domestic or wild animals into the refuge. The use of mechanical or electronic devices to lure or attract wildlife is prohibited.



Fishing is not permitted on or from the refuge.



The refuge conducts deer management hunts each fall utilizing hunters selected by means of a lottery. Contact the refuge office or website for information on dates and requirements. Seasonal hunting and trapping of any wildlife or waterfowl on or from the refuge, unless part of a management hunt, is not permitted.

## Nature Calendar

*January/  
February*

Bald eagles and waterfowl from the north feed along the ice free waters of the Potomac. Resident bald eagles rebuild nests, mate and lay eggs. White-tailed deer bucks shed their antlers. Salamanders come out of hibernation during the January thaw and journey to woodland vernal pools. Great horned owls are incubating eggs.

*March*



*Beaver with willow*

*April*

Most waterfowl have migrated back north. Resident eagles are incubating eggs. Beavers become more active, rebuilding lodges and dams. Frog and salamander eggs develop in vernal pools.

Eaglets hatch. Great blue heron courting and nesting peaks within the colony. Refuge and State Park host the annual Eagle Festival. Deer grow new antlers.

*May*

Bird migration is at its peak as songbirds, waterfowl and raptors continue to move through the refuge for points north. Bluebirds are nesting. White-tailed deer give birth to fawns.

*June*

Eaglets fledge. Turtle nesting season peaks. Spatterdock (or yellow pond lily) arrowhead and wild rice are in

S. Maslowski/USFWS



*Wood duck*

*July*



Bill Supulski/USFWS

*Child at wingspan banner*

full growth throughout the marshes. Muskrats produce their first litters for the year. Biting Deerflies hatch. In the woodland forest, the flutelike song of the Woodthrush can be heard along with the staccato “teacher, teacher, teacher” of the ovenbirds. Vernal pools have disappeared.

Young blue herons learn to fish in the marshes. Young Canada geese and ducks fledge. Swallows, kingbirds and flycatchers feast on the abundant insects.

*August*

Bill Wallen/USFWS



The dog days of summer have arrived. The forest is hot and humid. Micranthema spiders create inconvenient webs across trails. Crimson-eyed rose-mallow and swamp rose mallow, color the marshes with white and pink.

*September*

The southerly waterfowl migration has begun. Songbird and raptor migration peaks later in the month. Monarch butterflies are on the move southward towards Mexico.

*October*

As Autumn colors the forest with yellow, orange and red, eagles begin to congregate in the region for the winter. Beech nuts litter the forest floor. The first frost can occur any day.

*November/  
December*

Eagles begin courtship. Waterfowl and tundra swans overwinter in the refuge marshes. White-tailed deer management hunts take place on the refuge.